

Why do children involve teachers in their play and learning?

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on why children involve teachers in their play and learning in early childhood education. The main question is: For what reasons might children invite teachers to take part in their play? The data consists of video-observations of children from eight preschools and one primary school. In the analysis we find five categories in which children's reasons for involving teachers can be traced: to get help from the teacher, be acknowledged as competent persons, make the teachers aware of other children breaking rules, get information about and confirmation of how things work, and involving teachers in play. Both children and teachers seem to agree on these forms of interplay. These could be signs of a traditional teacher role, i.e. that teachers know how things should be, and has the power and knowledge to mediate. At the same time, another picture stands clearly out, of the child as well as the teacher. The fact that children themselves make room for their playfulness indicates that the teachers to some extent give children that room. However, this demands that teachers develop a goal-oriented strategy, which involves play as well as learning.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article est centré sur les raisons pour lesquelles les enfants intègrent les enseignants à leur jeux et apprentissages dans l'éducation préscolaire. La question principale est de savoir pourquoi les enfants inviteraient les enseignants à prendre part à leurs jeux? Les données consistent en des observations – vidéo d'enfants de huit structures préscolaires et une école primaire. L'analyse montre 5 catégories de raisons pour lesquelles l'implication des enseignants peut être trouvée : pour obtenir l'aide des enseignants, pour être reconnu comme une personne compétente, pour avertir l'enseignant que d'autres enfants changent les règles, pour recevoir information et confirmation sur la façon dont les choses se passent et pour impliquer les enseignants dans leurs jeux. Les enfants et les enseignants semblent être d'accord sur ces formes d'interaction. Ceci peut être le signe d'un rôle traditionnel d'enseignement, par exemple que les enseignants savent comment les choses doivent être et ont le pouvoir et les connaissances pour les médiatiser. En même temps, une image se distingue clairement, de l'enfant comme de l'enseignant. Le fait que les enfants eux-mêmes accordent de l'importance au ludique montre que les enseignants, dans une certaine mesure, le leur permettent. Cependant, ceci exige que les enseignants développent une stratégie orientée à la fois sur le jeu et l'apprentissage.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Der Beitrag fokussiert auf die Frage, warum Kinder in der frühkindlichen Bildung die Fach- bzw. Lehrkräfte in ihr Spiel einbeziehen. Die Daten bestehen aus videographierten Aufzeichnungen von Kindern aus acht Vorschulen und einer Grundschule. In der Analyse wurden fünf Kategorien von Gründen der Kinder für das Einbeziehen von Fach- bzw. Lehrkräften gefunden: (1) um Hilfe zu erhalten, (2) um Anerkennung als kompetente Personen zu erhalten, (3) aufmerksam zu machen, dass andere Kinder Regeln verletzen, (4) um

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Informationen und Bestätigungen darüber zu erhalten, wie Dinge funktionieren, und (5) um sie als Mitspieler zu gewinnen. Sowohl die Kinder als auch die Fach- und Lehrkräfte scheinen hinsichtlich dieser Formen des Zusammenspielens überein zu stimmen. Dies können Anzeichen für die traditionelle Rolle der Fach- bzw. Lehrkraft darstellen, dass sie bzw. er nämlich weiß, wie die Dinge sein sollten und das Wissen und die Macht hat, sie zu vermitteln. Gleichzeitig zeichnet sich deutlich ein anderes Bild sowohl des Kindes als auch der Fach- bzw. Lehrkraft ab: Die Tatsache, dass die Kinder sich selbst Raum schaffen für ihre Spielfreude, zeigt an, dass die Fach- bzw. Lehrkräfte ihnen diesen Raum in gewissem Ausmaß auch geben. Dies erfordert allerdings, dass Fach- bzw. Lehrkräfte eine zielorientierte Strategie entwickeln, die sowohl Spiel als auch Lernen einbezieht.

RESUMEN: El tema central de este artículo es por qué los niños involucran a los profesores en sus juegos y aprendizaje en la educación preescolar. La pregunta principal es: ¿Por qué razones los niños querían invitar a los profesores a participar en sus juegos? Los datos se obtuvieron de videos de observación a niños de 8 establecimientos preescolares y una escuela primaria. En el análisis, pudimos encontrar 5 razones por las cuales los niños involucran a sus maestros/as: recibir ayuda de parte del profesor/a, ser reconocidos como personas competentes, mostrar a los profesores que otros niños no respetan las reglas, obtener información y confirmación de cómo funcionan las cosas, e involucrar a los profesores en el juego. Tanto los pequeños como sus maestros están, al parecer, de acuerdo en estas formas de interacción a través del juego. Podrían ser una señal del rol del maestro/a tradicional, es decir, que los profesores saben cómo deberían ser las cosas, y que tienen autoridad y conocimientos para actuar como mediadores/as. En paralelo, se grafica claramente otra imagen del niño/a y también del profesor/a. El hecho de que los niños/as por sí solos generen este espacio propio inspirado en la travesura indica que los profesores, en cierta medida, abren ese espacio a los niños/as. Sin embargo, esto obliga a los profesores/as a elaborar una estrategia con metas específicas, que involucra jugar y aprender a la vez.

Keywords: child initiated interaction; children's perspectives; play and learning; early childhood education

Background

In the third millennium children are supposed to be respected and accepted as competent human beings, worth listening to – in research (Farrell 2005) as well as in everyday life (UN Convention of the Right of the Child 1989). In this project we use children's perspectives as a starting point when studying how children involve their teachers in everyday life in preschool and school. The questions we are trying to answer are – in what way and in what situations do children involve the teachers in their play and learning?

Play and learning

Let us first consider the concepts of play and learning. Even if play and learning most often are viewed as two different phenomena in research and pedagogical practice, there are similarities in what characterises them and what kind of experiences they can challenge in children's worlds. At the foundation for both play and learning lies the *creation of meaning*. Moreover *fantasy*, *creativity* and the opportunity to *control* and *set up aims* are also pointed out as important prerequisites of play and learning (see Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2006b, manuscript, for a more extended

discussion). In this paper play and learning refers to activities that the children are involved in, which could be described both as play- and learning-activities. Occasionally the interactions more evidently refer to one of these dimensions. The important point here is that it is the children who have control, they set up the goals and they create meaning in their activities. Fantasy and creativity can be more or less apparent in these interactions.

Our idea is that play and learning in children's worlds could, at best, constitute a continuum, in which dimensions of both aspects could enrich each other. However through different experiences in life, the child gradually becomes integrated into a dualistic way of thinking where play and learning are separated from each other more and more, and where the worlds of play are removed from everyday life and limited to certain periods or specific contexts (Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2006b, manuscript). When in this article we separate between play and learning it is because we have earlier found a rhetoric about play as important in preschool, but still teachers put most of their efforts into the activities they have planned themselves, and where they have an intention to teach children something. The teacher addresses the task and the learning feature it contains (Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2006b, manuscript). We interpret this finding as teachers in early childhood education have a perspective on play as something different from learning. In play the teacher is not necessary but in learning they are. All people carry taken-for-granted assumptions, and we believe the separation between play and learning is one assumption strongly held by people in general, but also among teachers, although they would talk about play as important for children's learning. And from research we know that teachers act differently in teacher initiated activities, trying to mediate knowledge or asking question they already know the answer to (Dahlberg, Pence, and Moss 1999; Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2009).

Children's perspectives

Piaget (1976) is the researcher who introduced a child perspective in science. It was he who introduced the research world to listening to children, even if he interpreted children on the basis of his own presumptions and theoretical perspective (Aronsson 1998). Since the time Piaget started his research 80 years ago, both the way we communicate with children and how we interpret what children express have changed (see Pramling Samuelsson 2005). Both in the research arena and in pedagogical practice, more and more attention is being paid to the idea of making children express their own way of perceiving and experiencing different aspects of their world (Doverborg and Pramling Samuelsson 2000, 2001; Johansson 1999 2004, 2007; Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2006b; Lindahl 1996; Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson 2003). Still, it is important to bear in mind that researchers who attempt to speak in terms of children's perspectives may be faced with a dilemma between his or her adult perspective and the child's perspective (for a more exhaustive discussion, see e.g. Halldén 2003; Johansson 2003a; Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan 2003).

In many different studies and evaluations where children's voices have been allowed to come through, children emphasise that it is the play in preschool which is meaningful to them (Alvestad 2001; Pramling, Klerfelt, and Williams Granelid 1995; Governmental proposition 2004:05/11). Further, children say that it is first and foremost in play that they themselves have control and are allowed to make choices (Johansson and Johansson 2003; Sheridan and Pramling Samuelsson 2001; Strander

1997). In play many children experience that they are in control, and that is just one of the main points Corsaro (2003) emphasises when he analyses children's own culture. He says: 'Kids want to gain control of their own lives and share that sense of control with each other' (2003, ix). The importance of having control and sharing it with others is revealed when children talk about their play. From this perspective it is interesting to try to understand what roles teachers get in children's play or in the activities the children have chosen and are in control of. What kinds of interaction do the children involve their teachers in and for what purposes (Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2006a)?

In our time children's perspectives are generally on the agenda (UN Convention of the Right of the Child 1989), although we also know that we can never take their perspective fully, since doing so implies 'that the child's experiences could have been our own if we were in the same situation as him/her' (Johansson 1999; Sommer, Pramling Samuelsson, and Hundeide, forthcoming). However, we can aim to understand each child's expressions on their own merits and as a means of creating meaning for him or her. It is not so much a question of *taking* the child's perspective as a question of *getting close* to the child's life-world (Johansson 2003a). We can also turn it the other way around as Einarsdóttir (2007) does, and claim that children are as trustworthy informants as adults are. They not only have their own perspectives but also have the right to be heard. It is thus a matter of finding an appropriate methodology, ways of coming close to the children's experiences (Einarsdóttir 2007). Researchers need to keep an open mind and be ready to listen to what children have to say.

There are, however, preconditions for getting to know children's perspectives or views. Children require both room and space (physical and mental) to be able to make choices and to take the initiative. Research from different countries has shown us that some countries are struggling to give the children room for more play and choices while others already allow the children plenty of space and freedom (Pramling Samuelsson and Fleer 2008).

While Piaget has been heavily criticised (Hundeide 1977; Donaldson 1992) for his way of asking children questions, he was, nevertheless, the first researcher to try to capture children's perspectives by giving them open and wide questions in order to elicit their subjective experiences. Today, however, there is much debate about the distinction between child perspectives and children's perspectives, and the question of each child's own participation in meaning-making (Halldén 2007). Since the beginning of the 1980s efforts have been made to let children's subjective worlds come out into the open (Pramling 1983; Tiller 1991). This means that the children themselves have had to be active in expressing themselves in one way or another. Children's actions (verbal or non-verbal, see e.g. Pramling Samuelsson and Lindahl 1997) were captured either by means of observation or talking with them (Doverborg and Pramling Samuelsson 2000) about their daily life.

In an attempt to approach children's perspectives as closely as possible, the present study focuses on the essential aspect, that is, the meaning and the idea that the child expresses (Johansson 2003a; Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan 2003). The child constitutes the *figure* of the analysis and the teacher the *background*, even if their interaction has a clear role in the emerging results. The questions at issue are: *What interplay and meaning-making do children involve teachers in, and for what purpose?* In the discussion we will also raise the issue of: *In what way do teachers contribute to these interactions?* Here the room given in the interplay and dialogues between teacher and child plays an important role. Berit Bae (2004) describes dialogues in

preschool as either extensive or limited and often short. Bae states that a precondition for developing an extensive and playful dialogue is that the teacher directs him- or herself towards the child's life-world, towards seeing children as individuals, and also that the teacher sees his or her part in the child's educational process.

This means that what happens in short encounters is important. Daniel Stern (2004) talks about 'the present moment' and believes that it is those short moments of shared understanding that can be decisive in many issues. In the EPPE project (Effective Provision in Preschool Education) they talk about this phenomenon as 'shared sustainable thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2008). Intersubjectivity – encounters between life-worlds – is not only important for children's creation of meaning in play and learning but also the teachers' view of children, knowledge and learning (Johansson 2003b, 2004).

Data and analysis

The analysis in this paper is based on video-observations of eight groups of children: one toddler group, five sibling groups, one preschool class and one primary school class. The video-observations made during one whole year, here concern situations in which children have taken the initiative to interact with teachers in play and activities chosen by children themselves.¹ The situations presented below are chosen from a total of 60 hours' video-observations of interactions in the different groups, and the video-observations behind this particular analysis covered less than four hours of that total. The data represent variations in the children's reasons for involving teachers in their interactions. Their reasons can be drawn from the children's explicit invitations and questions to the teachers as well as from the content of the interaction with the teachers. Most of the analysed situations represent interactions initiated by the children. The only situations included in the present analysis that are organised by the teachers are some meals. Since the teachers almost never plan the communication at meals, there are obvious opportunities for children to take the initiative on these occasions (Eriksen Ødegaard 2007). The main focus of the present analysis is to find the meaning and the idea for interaction with teachers that the child expresses (Johansson 2003a; Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan 2003).

What we are looking for in the analysis are the qualitatively different meanings of children's intentions when they involve teachers in their play and learning. The analysis could be regarded as phenomenographic (Marton and Booth 1997), since the results are described as a number of qualitatively different categories. The data production is here both the video recordings as such and the detailed transcribed observations. The method of transcribing is to carefully describe the totality of the situation and the interaction going on, involving the child's initiative and the teachers' reactions. Spoken words, gestures, emotional expressions have been described. The analyses focus on finding patterns of variations that could be described as categories of meaning from the children's perspectives. This is a process of interpretation where the researcher focus on the subjective world of the child and comparing sequences until having covered the data as a whole. The various categories show children's ways of perceiving the teachers in preschool and school with reference to why they involve their teachers in play and learning when they have the opportunity to choose for themselves. We believe that what children say (in the interaction with other children and teachers) as well as what they do (their actions) are expressions of how children experience meaning. The qualitatively different categories that appear

in the analysis consist of descriptions exemplified by observations from the data. Those descriptive categories as a whole compose the result.

Results

Analysis of the data obtained from video observations showed that children's ways of creating and initiating interplay with teachers in play and learning could be described in five main categories. These categories illustrate that children involve teachers in their play and learning for various reasons. The children want to: 1) get help from teachers in play and learning, 2) be acknowledged by teachers as competent persons, 3) make teachers aware of when someone breaks rules, 4) get to know how things work and 5) involve teachers in play and playful communication.

1. Help from teachers

That children regard teachers as trustworthy and authoritative persons is quite obvious, something which certainly also leads to their turning to teachers when they need help in different ways. We can see examples of this in all age-groups in preschool and school. Children show that they need support and help when they are involved in conflicts, when their (and their friends') rights to things and play-worlds are threatened. Such situations can easily lead to conflicts in play, which they cannot always solve by themselves. Children also approach teachers when they intend to do something that they cannot manage on their own. As we can see below, the purpose of a child's initiative to ask for support and help could be the need of a downright service.

Petter (3.0) says: 'I want the railway.' The teacher gets up and takes down the railway from a shelf, saying: 'You want the railway.'

Here the child was unable to reach the railway so he needed help from a teacher. This implies that the organisation of the environment affects children's possibilities, of carrying out their activities without any help from the teachers.

The following sequence occurs after Edvin decides to make a drawing, takes a piece of paper and a pencil and sits down beside the teacher:

Edvin (3.9) says: 'I'm going to write to Santa Claus!' He looks at the teacher and says: 'I can't write, can you write for me?' The teacher answers: 'But if you can't write you can make a drawing for Santa Claus.'

Here Edvin shows that he does not believe that he is able to write, so he asks the teacher to help him. She then suggests that he can make a drawing instead. He draws Santa Claus' house instead and the observation continues:

Edvin asks the teacher to draw a window, but she says that the window he has drawn is very nice. He starts to roll up the drawing and the teacher says: 'You know, I can help you to put your name on the drawing.' He takes the pencil and wants to give it to the teacher. 'I can't write my name,' he says. 'You can try,' says the teacher. But he insists that he cannot and the teacher takes the pencil. Edvin has a clear opinion about where to put his name. When the teacher has written his name he says: 'There it should be a long.' He draws his finger from the name and cross the paper. The teacher looks puzzled. Then she gives him the pencil and says that he can do it himself. He takes the pencil and writes

figures looking like handwriting with flourishes. The teacher looks surprised but says nothing. Edvin carefully rolls up his drawing again.

In the above observation we can see that Edvin once again asks for help. Now he claims that he cannot write his name. The teacher says that he can, but this time he does not give in, so the teacher writes his name. However, he does not seem quite satisfied with this, and he draws some additional lines, which the teacher does not understand. In this observation Edvin shows that he does not trust himself to be able to write and therefore asks the teacher for help. But we can also see how he conducts the teacher to do it in the way he has in mind. Let us look at another situation:

Dimitro (4.5) is more occupied with Ian's (4.4) jigsaw than with his own. Ian is doing his jigsaw once again and when he is almost finished he says: 'I finished before Dimitro.' Dimitro is still holding a few remaining pieces in his hand. He asks Ian where to put the remaining pieces, but Ian answers: 'I don't know, ask him.' He points to Janne, a male student. Dimitro tries to catch the trainee's attention by waving his arms shouting 'You, you,' but the student does not react. Then Ian shouts: 'Big guy,' several times. Dimitro joins him. 'Big guy,' the boys shout in chorus. Janne responds and says: 'I do have a name, don't I? Do you know my name?' Janne continues: 'You have only two pieces left.' Dimitro tries to turn the pieces round to fit one piece in. Janne says: 'Try the other one first. Turn it around in different ways, try again, you have four different sides, try again.' Dimitro tries but cannot get them into place so Janne helps him.

You could probably just as well see this sequence as an example of category four, that is, Dimitro wants the teacher's confirmation that what he is doing is correct. However, we can ask ourselves if he is looking for confirmation, so that another reasonable interpretation can be that he wants a teacher to solve the problem of getting the last two jigsaw pieces in place. Perhaps you could interpret these acts to mean that the children are using teachers as supporters in order to be able to do things they realise they do not master on their own. But all examples in this category represent a concrete act on the part of the adult as a feedback to the child's request.

2. Be acknowledged as a competent individual

All children in preschool sometimes want to be acknowledged and heard in their play and learning, which is also a reason for calling for the teacher's attention. This they do in different ways, but often in connection with a wish to show the teacher something they have created or something they think that they can do. The children seem to want to be confirmed in their competence, their persona and/or their ideas. This is often expressed verbally: 'Look what I can do!' or 'Watch me!'

Dimitro (4.2) comes into the painting room, bringing a piece of wood which he is painting. 'Look what I'm doing,' he says and looks at the teacher. 'I had gold,' says Dimitro. The teacher does not respond to his statement. Dimitro paints round, round and sings: 'I can paint for my mum!' He turns to Ella who sits next to him. 'Look Ella, how nice mine is!'

Dimitro wants both children and teachers to see how good he is at painting. The first time he tries to tell one of the teachers, but since no one acknowledges him he turns to Ella, one of the other children, instead:

Now the teacher, Johanna (5.5), Roberto (2.10) and Viktor (5.3) are sitting on the mattress throwing a ball to each other. Alice (4.11) is hanging in a rope watching.

Charles (3.9) is swinging. 'Look, I'm swinging!' he says eagerly, addressing the teacher and the other children.

By asking the others to watch him swing, Charles also claims a part of the teacher's attention, and enters into the other children's interplay. He shows that he wants to be confirmed by both the teacher and his friends. As we will see below, Frida, too, turns to the teacher for some attention, at the same time as the other children become involved in presenting their competencies to each other:

The teacher sits at the table together with three children. 'I can write,' says Frida (7.0) proudly. 'And she can read too,' says Olle. 'Me too,' says another child. The teacher nods in agreement.

Sometimes children want to show that they have produced something; at other times they want to show their ability to perform:

'Look how I do it!' says Charles (3.9). He is frenetically daubing glue with both his hands.

In the example below we can see how children want to be observed by the teacher because they dare to climb high:

Miriam (2.1) climbs the wall bars. Tony (4.5) comes running, and climbs up when she climbs down. He calls for Zita, one of the teachers, several times, but when she does not hear he starts to call for another teacher. 'Miss, Miss, look at me!' He climbs high up on the wall bars. When the teacher looks at him he jumps down on the floor and looks very happy. 'Wow,' says the teacher in an admiring voice. 'You can go down, only using your arms too, like you did yesterday,' says the teacher to Tony.

Miriam is standing on the highest wall bar and it looks as if she is going to jump down. She considers this for a long while. She looks at the teachers several times, but does not say anything. The teachers are busy preparing for assembly and no one seems to take notice of Miriam. The jump never comes; she climbs down instead.

Here we can see one child who wants to be acknowledged for his ability to jump. He is duly acknowledged, and we can assume that this leads to him jumping. The other child, whose language is not sufficiently developed, shows with her whole body that she wants the teachers to discover her on the wall bars. However, the teachers do not see her, and this could be the reason why she chooses to climb down instead.

There are also examples of young children looking for confirmation that they are doing things correctly by looking at the teacher, for instance, each time they place a figure on the brick-game. We interpret this as a sign that young children need eye contact with teachers in order to get confirmation of their actions.

3. Make teachers aware that someone breaks rules

Rules can be broken both by other children and by teachers – something children often try to make the teachers aware of in play and learning. This could be when someone is misbehaving and does not follow the rules and conventions children perceive as prevailing in preschool. Sometimes it is the teachers who do not follow the rules the children expect. They are eager to inform the teachers about breaches of rules, either

ones that are clearly expressed or certain conventions, such as not drawing outside the paper, or when you need to change a child's diaper:

Ella (3.1) says: 'Oscar is painting outside the paper.' Now Oscar (1.9) notices this and starts to draw on the oilcloth. 'He is painting the wallpaper,' says Ella. Oscar points at the cloth where he has been drawing and Ella says: 'It doesn't matter!'

Ella tries to attract the teacher's attention when Oscar does not keep to the rules for drawing. When the teacher does not respond to this, Ella seems to change her mind and says that it does not matter that he has been drawing outside the piece of paper. In the perspective of the girl, this kind of transgression of the rule seems to be of little importance:

At assembly a child addresses the teacher with the following words: 'You forgot Oscar.' 'No,' answers the teacher, 'I did not.'

Here one child notices that the teacher has missed out Oscar's name at assembly and she tries to make the teacher aware of this. However, the teacher claims that she has not forgotten to mention Oscar. Here the child tries to correct the teacher and seems to claim every child's right to be mentioned.

4. *Get to know how things work*

Early in life children search for confirmation in order to know if they are on the right track when dealing with a certain task. In contrast to the first category, where the children seem to know how to make use of the teachers' competence and skills in order to bring their projects to where they wish, the children in the fourth category concentrate more on the teachers giving them verbal support and confirmation about the way things should be done. The children turn to the teacher in order to find out if something is right or wrong in relation to the activity or the task they are dealing with:

Johanna (5.0) and Sophia (5.5) are sitting at the table with a brick game. The teacher sits next to them and asks about the different pictures and talks to the children about them. The children have difficulties in distinguishing which side of the bricks should be turned upwards, since the different sides of the bricks belong to two different patterns, that is, two different games. Each time one of the girls shows a brick to the teacher and asks if it is the right one, the teacher answers either that it is right or that it is wrong.

Here two girls are working with a brick game. Even if they talk to each other, it is to the teacher they turn for confirmation that they are doing things correctly, and they look for support of their own opinions. The next observation also shows how children turn to the teachers for guidance:

Two children are gluing paper on a piece of wire netting, which is going to represent a tree. 'I'm painting on your finger,' says Viktor (3.2). 'Are we going to paint this?' asks Charles (3.11) turning to the teacher. 'Yes, when it's completely covered and we can't see the netting anymore,' answers the teacher.

That teachers know more and are more able to do things is quite obvious to children, and therefore it stands to reason that children turn to teachers when they want to know or get information about something:

Some children are sitting on the floor, placing letters in long rows. One child asks the observer what it says, but then he says: 'one, four, eight!' 'Can I see yours? [a pile of letters]' asks Ester (4.5). Tomas (5.5) says: 'If you take this one [he points to the letter D] I'll take this one [points to the letter G].' Now three other children sit by their sides, watching. Johanna (5.1) asks the teacher to read the letters by saying: 'Read what it says!' The teacher tries.

This is a common phenomenon when children start to use letters. That is, they ask what it says when they have placed letters in a row, as in this example, or when they have written something on paper. Here the children want both support in their performance and information from the teacher. The questioning here and in other examples is about getting to know about something, but children also ask in order to expand and be able to continue with the task at hand. Implicitly there exists one right answer, for instance, a certain combination of letters has a meaning that the teacher can confirm:

Dennis (2.9) shows the teacher a small plastic piece with a hole in it. 'It belongs to the truck,' he says. 'Is it for the truck?' asks the teacher. 'Put it in the wheelbarrow over there.' He places it in a small red plastic wheelbarrow. Eliza (2.11) picks up the piece, looks at it and gives it to the teacher who is sitting together with the children. Eliza takes it back, replaces it in the wheelbarrow and starts to walk around the yard with the wheelbarrow.

This is one of several examples when the youngest children are checking their own thought with a teacher, i.e. if a specific thing belongs to a specific object. Their purpose is to obtain a verbal answer from the teacher, either in terms of information or confirmation.

5. *Involve teachers in play and playful communication*

That children see teachers as potential partners in play is revealed in their way of acting, since they invite teachers to join them in their play in different ways. This usually happens by going beyond the 'here and now' situations and either joking, 'fantasizing' or using symbolic expressions:

It is circle time. 'Should we check how many children we are today?' asks the teacher. She points to figures on the wall. They count how many children there are. Then the teacher shows a card with a snail on it, which illustrates the song 'Little snail, take care!' 'Let's count,' she says. [They usually count to three before they start to sing.] The children start: '1, 2, 3, 4, 5...' all the way up to 20. 'No, stop! If we are going to sing it's enough to count to three,' the teacher objects. She starts to count, over and over again, but the children continue to count and laugh uncontrollably. Finally the teacher laughs too and starts to sing 'Little snail.' The children join her in the song.

Here it is obvious that the children as a collective try to joke with the teacher, and it is not until she joins the children, laughs and confirms the children's playfulness, that the children give in and join her in the song. In the next observation we can see another example of a child joking with a teacher. When working with the human body as a theme the children have made dolls. Maja approaches her teacher:

Maja (8.2) says: 'Hi, look at mine!' She shows a paper doll they have made. The teacher says: 'No, have you cut it off [the head]?' Maja laughs and shows how she has folded the head back, making it look as if it was missing.

It looks as if Maja is trying to joke with her teacher by pretending that she has cut off the paper doll's head. Maja seems to anticipate a reaction from the teacher. Below we can follow a boy who tries to involve his teacher in his creation of meaning and his play:

Valter (2.3) is sitting at the table. He puts two pencils on a piece of paper and wraps the paper around them, into a roll. The teacher Lena is sitting next to him. 'Leave,' he says when he hands over the roll to the teacher, who asks: 'Are you giving it to me? Thanks a lot!' She continues: 'So you don't want to draw anything on the paper then?' 'No,' says Valter. 'I want to make another parcel,' he says, and once again he wraps the paper around the pencils. 'Are you going to give them to someone else now?' 'Mm,' he says, dropping the pencils, bending down and picking them up and once again putting them back in the parcel. /.../ Then he walks to Birgitta, another teacher, with his parcel. Valter places the parcel on her lap, but she is talking to another teacher and seems not to take any notice of him. He waits for a long while, but she neither talks to him nor looks at him. Valter tries to say something, but does not succeed in getting the teacher's attention. Finally, Valter folds the parcel again and walks away. He drops the parcel and picks it up several times, saying 'Oh, oh, oh!' He crumples up the paper around the pencils once again, walks over to Lena and says: 'This.' She bends down beside him and takes the parcel. 'Do you have a present again?' she asks. 'What is it?' She unwraps the paper and says: 'Pencils!' 'It's lollipops,' says Valter and walks over to the observer and shows them to her too.

Valter is doing his utmost to make the teachers take part in his game, in which he pretends that he is giving away a parcel. The first teacher is more or less willing to take part, but has maybe had enough? He is persistent and continues to try with the next teacher.

In the next situation the result is different, the teacher plays the game that the child has invited her to take part in:

Victor (5.3) is sitting at the dinner table. He sees the shadows from his fingers on the back of the chair. He turns to the teacher who stands next to him and says that it looks like an ant. The teacher asks if he can do something else with the shadow. He holds up his own hand and says: 'Look, a tree!' Victor takes both his hands and shows a tree. 'That was a better tree,' says the teacher. Victor makes a new figure of the shadow and the teacher asks what it is. 'A dog,' he says. 'Yes!!!' cries the teacher. Victor looks at his hands and makes new figures. 'Can you do more? You can do lots of things!' Victor tries. 'You made a hole,' says the teacher. 'It's an eye,' he says. The teacher tries and says that Victor made a bird. 'Can you make a bird? There has to be a little bit of magic.' Victor ponders. 'It turned into a bone,' he says. 'Perhaps it's Linus' [a dog] bone,' says the teacher. Victor laughs and tries again. 'I think I'll make a little old man, but maybe I can't do that.' 'Try,' says the teacher. He tries and says: 'But, I made a rabbit instead.' 'He has ears, look how nice,' says the teacher. Victor laughs. 'Now you can make a rabbit,' he says to the teacher. 'How did you do that?' asks the teacher. Victor shows her. 'Oh, then there were two,' she says when both Victor's and her shadow figures become visible on the chair. 'Hello rabbit, and there we have the nose,' says the teacher. Mohammed (4.4) comes and stands next to them, but he doesn't seem to notice the shadow play. 'What is he [the rabbit] eating?' asks the teacher. 'He's eating a carrot,' says Viktor. 'He [the rabbit] can eat it!' 'Do you know how to make a rabbit?' Victor asks Mohammed. Mohammed tries to form a shape with his fingers too. The teacher says that he will have to move over to the other side of the chair. She helps him to form a shape with his fingers. He laughs, but doesn't perceive the shadow on the chair. He laughs and leaves. 'I don't want any more food,' says Victor. 'No, but can you clear the table then?' He takes away his plate.

Victor introduces a game to which the teacher tunes in and contributes so that it develops. It develops into a mutual exchange where the child and the teacher give and take,

lead and follow. They both try to make Mohammed interested, but without success. Mohammed seems unable to find out what it is all about and he leaves. But Victor also gives the teacher instructions and tells her what to do:

Oscar (2.1) walks over to the teacher, giving her a plastic cup. 'Have you made coffee?' she asks. He takes the spoon and offers it to her. Sits down on the chair. The teacher asks if Oscar has a cake as well. He points. He stirs with the spoon in the cup.

Here Oscar invites the teacher to take part in the game by giving her something to drink, which she interprets as coffee. He plays along in the coffee party and pretends that he too is drinking coffee. Teachers seem to support family play since they encourage all kinds of activities in this area in a positive way. The children in this study seem to perceive the habit of drinking coffee as something that belongs to the teachers' world and as something positive, and they obviously make use of this habit in order to bring the teachers into their play:

Some children are sitting in the sandbox when a teacher passes by. One girl looks at the teacher and says: 'Don't touch the cookies, 'cos they're very hot.' The teacher: 'Are they newly baked?' 'They are really hot,' says the child again and continues: 'I'll have to blow on them.'

Here the child makes contact by fantasising and in this way invites the teacher to take part in the game. The teacher plays along. What we can see in the last examples is how children try to connect to the teachers' world in order to make the teachers take part in their play-world. And from children's perspective, very much of the teachers' world seems to be about food, cookies and coffee.

Discussion

The study shows that the children involve their teachers in their play and learning for different purposes. They invite teachers to take part when they need help, when they want to be acknowledged as competent persons and when someone breaks rules. The children also turn to the teacher when they want to be informed about 'how things are' and to be confirmed as play partners. Before we discuss the pattern of meaning creation the children express when they take the initiative to invite interplay with teachers further, we would like to mention that it is amazing how many things the children actually do in the preschool context without involving teachers. This becomes obvious when comparing the data analyses here with the data of the project as a whole. It is not often (even if it does happen) that a child, for instance, asks a teacher to take out a book from a shelf that he or she cannot reach. Instead the child climbs the shelf and fetches it. Children solve many conflicts by themselves and they help each other without involving the teachers.

It appears that children rarely try to make contact with teachers when they are engaged in play or other activities chosen by themselves. Children probably choose activities that they can deal with on their own, most of the time. This result is in line with previous observation studies. Tizard et al. (1988) showed that children in preschool approached other children five times more often than they approached teachers. Sylva, Roy and Painter (1980) show in the Oxfordshire study that verbal interaction between children and teachers took place during less than 5% of the observed time, and during most of that time the interaction was prompted by the

children's need for assistance in one way or other. Recent analyses of communication in early childhood education show similar results (Siraj-Blatchfords and Manni 2008). The reason for this could be worth some consideration.

Why do the children seem to prefer to play and learn on their own? We know from previous research that children value their play highly and defend it (Corsaro 1987, 2003; Johansson 1999, 2007). In play children have opportunities to set goals and to interact on their own terms and to teach each other (Frønes 1995; Williams 2001). Perhaps the children in our study experience that this opportunity is at risk when teachers are involved in their play-worlds. Teachers are different from children, they interact differently and they are less playful.

Maybe the children realise that teachers are too busy to play? Children are close to each other in their interactions, while teachers, for various reasons, often work from a distance (Johansson 2003b, 2004). In a study on teachers' work with the youngest preschool children in 30 preschools in Sweden, Johansson (2004) shows that a large proportion of the teachers shifted between a kind of distance to the children and getting themselves involved in the children's play. The most dominant feature, however, was a kind of 'wait and see' attitude, often expressed in stressful situations and in order to take control and to fortify their overall responsibility for the group of children. Emilson's and Folkesson's study (2006, also Emilson 2007) shows that strong teacher control means less opportunities for children's influence and playfulness. However, some children have more power than other children and can challenge teachers (Emilson 2007; Eriksen Ødegaard 2007; Löfdahl 2002). In an international study comparing young children's experiences of preschool in different countries, Pramling Samuelsson and Sheridan (2008) show that teachers do have a 'wait and see' attitude and a somewhat reserved position in children's everyday activities in preschool. To keep oneself in the background of children's play seems to be a prevailing discourse. This is also apparent in Lena Hallengren's² inspection, in which she studies how children experience their preschool and if they feel happy about it. To the question: 'Does your teacher play with you sometimes?' one child answered: 'Is she allowed to?' (Governmental proposition 2004/05:11).

It is interesting to note that on several occasions the children turned to us observers. One reason for this is probably that the children knew that we were there because we were interested in what they were doing. But being involved in children's worlds is also one of the teacher's main tasks. Here the teachers find themselves in a dilemma. The context of preschool requires teachers to get involved in children's activities but at the same time the context demands that teachers be responsible for all children. This may force teachers to focus their attention on other things than the individual children.

We have also seen that the children, by being able to choose when to involve the teachers, are given a certain amount of influence and freedom. They also show that they involve the teachers when they need them, something the teachers seem to respond to. At the same time there is a risk. If teachers often take the overall responsibility, distancing themselves from the children's life-worlds when they work, this could very well lead to the children not involving their teachers other than when they need them for some kind of 'service.' When teachers interact with children, they often assume a supportive role and clear the way for them rather than problematising, challenging and communicating with children to fortify their competence. The teachers in this study do not seem to challenge the children very much in their interplay, neither in children's own free activities, nor when they invite the teachers to communicate (Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2006a, 2006b). One reason might be that the teachers are afraid

to interfere in children's free play; they think there is a risk that they could spoil it for them, a view teachers themselves often express. This strong desire to protect children's play might, however, lead to teachers missing out important moments when children do offer opportunities to bring together play and learning.

We have often seen that *children seem to constitute a bridge between play and learning* in their interplay with teachers (Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson 2006b). Children challenge, provoke and joke with the teachers and each other whether their interplay is embedded in play or in learning. It is often the children who drive the dimensions of play, when they are given room for this, but sometimes they also act in opposition to the teachers' intentions. Unfortunately, we have also noticed that children's playfulness is quite often ignored or seems to be invisible to the teachers, perhaps because this playfulness does not fit into what the teacher wishes to focus on.

Teachers have been brought up in a society where dualistic thinking dominates and where play and learning are separated (Merleau-Ponty 1962). From a didactic perspective, the teacher has an essential and significant role in children's play as well as learning. The teacher can help children to create good conditions for play and learning by supplying material and contributing frames (Bennett, Wood, and Rogers 1997), as well as ideas and challenges which will support further development of the play and the children's thoughts (Vygotsky 1978, 1995). Furthermore, since play is not free from power, hierarchies or positioning, a sensitive teacher who can help children in their learning process is required (Johansson 1999, 2007). By taking part in children's play, teachers also confirm that play is important (Manning and Sharp 1977).

When it comes to the youngest children, we find that they are represented in all categories, with the exception of category 3, 'make the teacher aware of when someone breaks rules or conventions in play and learning.' On the other hand, the youngest children are the ones that most frequently invite teachers to play and communicate. One explanation for this might be that children and teachers, especially in the departments for the youngest children, are physically closer to each other. The teachers usually sit on the floor with the children and the children often seek contact. If teachers are physically and mentally present in children's worlds, the potential for children to initiate quite a lot of playful communication and play is considerable (Bae 2004; Johansson 2004; Stern 2004).

Kerstin Strander (1997) shows in her thesis on teenagers' reminiscences of their time in preschool, that the young people do not remember very much about the teachers, even if they perceived that they were present somewhere in the periphery. What they remember best are play and interplay. Strander also reports that although the teenagers had perceived that the teachers wished to give children freedom and access to their own feelings, there did not appear to have been any dialogue about the children's own view of what kind of content they wanted in their everyday life.

One of the two categories in which the difference between the youngest and the oldest children is most obvious is category 4, 'ask in order to get to know how things are.' The older children in preschool and school are much more frequent in this category. When it comes to category 5, 'invites to play and playful communication,' it is the way of doing this that differs between the youngest and the oldest children. The youngest invite the teachers to actually take part in their make-believe games, while the oldest are challenging and joking with them. Let us linger a while at children's playfulness and humour. Frode Søbstad (1995) describes different theoretical perspectives on humour. He says that children are always chasing something fun, and that humour has always existed in preschool.

A desire to learn is a concept that has been used frequently in the Swedish preschool (Skolverket 2003), and humour does contain desire. According to Søbstad (1995), children's humour is first and foremost about playing with the language or contradictions, something we recognise from our observations in the project. We have many examples of how children play with words by turning them around, rhyming, joking with the teacher, challenging conventions and trying absurdities. Søbstad refers to McGhee, who suggests that, in humour a thought object is treated 'as if' it was something else. 'As if' is just one of the central dimensions in children's play. In order to value humour, there has to be an understanding that enables children to interpret and see contradictions and meanings in the language, according to Søbstad. From our results we can also see that when children involve their teachers in their projects, it is often the older preschool children who bring linguistic games into their interplay with them. The pedagogical challenge for the teachers is then to see, meet and involve themselves in children's playful use of the language.

Could it be like Sylva, Roy and Painter (1980, 126) say: 'Teachers in nursery classes expected their young children to plan their own activities and then get on with them.' Nowadays, if the teacher believes in the intentions that the curriculum (Ministry of Education and Science in Sweden 2006a, 2006b) is permeated with – that communication and interaction are crucial for children's learning – then s/he also has to be close to the children, so that communication and interaction can take place. Sylva, Roy and Painter (1980) say that rich dialogues demand quiet, intimate contexts, and they think that preschool seems to be quite the opposite. However, this depends on how the environment in preschool is designed and how the conditions for interplay between teachers and children are formed. These are determined both by the teacher's organisation (Nordin-Hultman 2004) and the teacher's attitude, way of acting and view of children as well as the context (Johansson 2003a). Furthermore, both elaborate and open interplay between children and their teachers has been observed, although these sequences are often very short (Bae 2004).

To sum up, what kind of teachers do children need in a modern preschool? What kind of expectations do children have of their teachers?

First and foremost, children seem to want a teacher who helps and confirms them in their play and learning. Children want support in practical difficulties, but also to be seen as important and competent individuals. Children want to know when they are doing the right things and want to appear in a favourable light to their teachers by informing them when peers break rules. By this the children also confirm the teachers, in the sense that they are to be trusted, they know how things should be and they have power and knowledge to mediate. These could be signs of a traditional teacher role (Dahlberg and Lenz Taguchi 1994), but it could also show that children do know that teachers possess more knowledge than they do (Pramling 1983). Most of the categories are linked with this. The study implies that both children and teachers seem to agree on these forms of interplay. We have, for example, implied that teachers sometimes take on the role of 'service people,' which is something that the children also seem to expect. At the same time, another picture gradually emerges, of the child as well as the teacher. The children provoke and joke with the teachers and with each other in play as well as learning. They invite the teachers to participate in their play. They are active, using their whole being in order to involve the teachers. Even though we have pointed out that teachers do not always accept, or even acknowledge, these invitations, a change in the teacher's role seems to take place. The fact that children themselves make room for their playfulness indicates that that

the teachers to some extent give children that room. In this way, children can contribute to a change of discourse, and to teachers who are active and participate in children's playfulness. However, this demands that teachers develop a goal-oriented strategy that involves play as well as learning (Pramling Samuelsson and Asplund Carlsson 2003, 2008).

Notes

1. The project as a whole is described in Johansson and Pramling Samuelsson (2006b). The aim was to find out if and how play and learning can be integrated in a pedagogical approach in preschool and school.
2. Previous Minister of Preschool Education in Sweden.

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